

Metaphysics in early-modern psychology: The rejection of substance ontology by  
Spinoza and Hume.<sup>1</sup>

By

William Meehan<sup>2</sup> (wmeehan@wi.edu)

San Francisco, CA

National Coalition of Independent Scholars

wmeehan.net

*Abstract*

Much conceptual confusion in contemporary psychology stems from disregarding metaphysical underpinnings, an attitude rooted in logical positivism's emulation of David Hume's distaste for metaphysical language. Hume's attitude reflected an identification of "metaphysics" with Scholastic and Cartesian speculation – an identification that interfered with his framing objections in metaphysical terms. It is argued that the metaphysical underpinnings of Hume's position were anticipated in Spinoza's critiques of Scholastic and Cartesian philosophy. Spinoza had strongly influenced the intellectual environment within which Hume developed his ideas. It is specifically argued that Hume's rhetorical strategy obscures similarities between his and Spinoza's positions on the idea of substance. It is suggested that the influence of Spinozist ideas on Hume undercuts justifications for rejecting metaphysics put forth by logical positivists, from whom both experimental and hermeneutical psychologists derive anti-metaphysical biases.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a recent issue of *The Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, Fiona Hibberd (2014) has argued that a large part of the conceptual muddle in contemporary psychology is due to the discipline's tendency to ignore its metaphysical underpinnings. This theoretical confusion is particularly evident in conflicts between the opposed views of experimental and hermeneutical psychologists. Both of these groups, ironically, share a common irrealist ontology with roots in logical positivism, and its campaign to rid science of Kantian idealism by recapturing the allegedly anti-metaphysical skeptical purity of David Hume (Bennett, 1971, Stanistreet, 2002).

As subsequent research has revealed, however, Hume was far less skeptical and anti-realist than the logical positivists had believed (Kemp Smith, 2005/1941; Stanistreet, 2002; Mounce, 1999; Meehan, 2010; Meehan & Stiver, 2009; Read, & Richman (Eds.), 2007). And, while it is true that Hume was leery of metaphysical language, that attitude was, at least in part, a stylistic choice dictated by his professional decision to support himself with his pen by writing for a broad non-academic audience. His aversion to metaphysical language also reflected his identification of "metaphysics" with the speculative systems of the Cartesians and Scholastics – an identification that, though understandable in light of the dominance of such systems in natural philosophy, had the unfortunate effect of obscuring the metaphysics underlying his objections to them. This is particularly true of his treatment of Spinoza, whose metaphysically framed critiques of Cartesian and Scholastic conceptions of substance anticipated the substance of Hume's own.

The idea that Hume was significantly influenced by Spinoza runs contrary to the canonical division of early modern philosophy into rationalist -- Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, Cordemoy -- and empiricist -- Locke, Berkeley, Hume -- camps (Boss, 1982; Neu, 1977; Levett, 1991; Maxwell, 2002). Some scholars, however, have observed significant parallels between Hume and Spinoza: most notably in their respective treatments of popular religion (Popkin, 1979) but also between their theories of cognition and emotion (Klever, 1990, 1993; Baier, 1991, 1993). In addition, as I argue elsewhere (Meehan, in preparation), both Hume's naturalism and his epistemology bear marked similarities to Spinoza's. Furthermore, it is quite clear that, though Spinoza was marginalized by the social and political elites of the period, he had a profound effect on what Jonathan Israel (2001) has called the radical enlightenment, with which Hume was in prolonged contact during the preparation and writing of his *Treatise of Human Nature* (2007/1739-40).

Hume's concerted attempts to avoid questions of ontology -- what the early Moderns referred to as "first philosophy" -- makes the question of comparable parallels with Spinoza on specific metaphysical questions more complex; and because his only explicit reference to Spinoza cites a secondary source, it is not possible to argue that his metaphysical positions were directly derived from Spinoza. Furthermore, this one reference to Spinoza -- expressed in a few paragraphs on the latter's notion of substance -- is far from unequivocal. On a superficial reading of the passage it seems to be a straightforward condemnation of Spinoza, but closer examination shows that Hume's critique in these paragraphs is directed elsewhere. Furthermore, when read in conjunction with

the methodological and theoretical affinities noted by Baier, Klever and Popkin, these paragraphs reveal an underlying notion of substance far closer to Spinoza's than traditional histories of philosophy would suggest.

That such a metaphysical position should require very close reading, of both Hume and Spinoza, should not be at all surprising. Hostility to Spinoza's ideas was such that during his lifetime he was subjected to official scrutiny and, on one occasion was the subject of an assassination attempt. The descendant of Portuguese Jews who had only survived by disguising their beliefs from the inquisition, he went to considerable lengths to make his ideas seem less radical than they really were. He kept the bulk of his work from publication until after his death, and even then, it only escaped suppression by dint of considerable subterfuge (Israel, 2001). Half a century later, in Britain, as in Western Europe generally, public reference to his work, in any but the most unflattering terms risked the wrath of religious and political authority. And, Hume, who emulated Spinoza in leaving his most important work on religion, and even his observations on women's equality, for posthumous publication, was not a firebrand.

#### SECTION I – THE CONTEXT OF DISCUSSION

Hume's explicit discussion of Spinoza is limited to a relatively short segment in Book I of his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739). In these paragraphs, Hume ridicules Spinoza's philosophy in general, calling him an infamous atheist (T1.4.5.17 & 19) and dismissing his metaphysics of substance as "incoherent" (T.1.4.5.29). But neither of these attacks can be taken quite at face value both

because the ridicule that seems to be aimed at Spinoza is actually intended for the 18<sup>th</sup> century British natural theologians (T1.4.5.16) who are the real targets of Hume's remarks, and also because Hume's account of Spinoza's doctrine of substance is not only based on a secondary source but is misstated. It is not Spinoza, but his reputation that is under discussion here.

Furthermore, our assessment of the importance of these remarks has to include their role in Hume's overall project in the *Treatise*. Unlike Spinoza's *Ethics*, which is devoted to a discussion of the totality of nature, Hume's work is limited to an account of *human* nature, as subdivided into the three Parts that make up the *Treatise*: "Of the Understanding", "Of the Passions" and "Of Morals". The remarks on Spinoza occur at the end of the first of these: in Part I Section 4, where, having finished his own treatment of human cognition, Hume turns to a discussion of competing theories. These he divides into three main categories: with two sections on Skepticism, and one each on the Ancient (Aristotelian) and Modern (Cartesian-- empirical) systems. His discussion of Spinoza, however, is not part of any of these summary sections; it comes rather in a fifth section on the immateriality of the soul –an essentially theological question. This theological question, and a related discussion on personal identity, comprise the last two sections before the conclusion of Book I. It will be important to consider, below, the question of what function these peripheral remarks have in the development of Hume's larger argument about substance; but before turning to that analysis we need to first make sense of the remarks themselves and the sources on which they are based.

One thing that makes Hume's reference to Spinoza stand out is that it is an exception to a stylistic tendency, in Hume, who, like other early modern writers, generally does not mention other authors by name in the body of his text. In T1.2.3.7, for example, when he mentions a "great philosopher", he is referring to Locke; but he only reveals that fact in a footnote. He does the same thing with a reference to Hobbes at T1.3.3.4, and again, in the next paragraph, with the name of his main intellectual opponent, Samuel Clarke. Hume's naming Spinoza in the body of his text is, thus, a very deliberate act; and he is quite clear about his reasons for it.

His discussion of Spinoza comes, as has been noted, in the context of a discussion of the substance of the soul, which begins at T1.4.5.17, with the apparently outrageous assertion: "that the doctrine of the immateriality, simplicity, and indivisibility of a thinking substance is a true atheism . . .". He then elaborates on claim, noting that it "will serve to justify all those sentiments, for which Spinoza is so universally infamous." Finally, he concludes the paragraph by saying: "From this topic, I hope at least to reap one advantage, that my adversaries will not have any pretext to render the present doctrine [i.e., Hume's own position] odious by their declamations, when they see that they [the declamations] can be so easily retorted on them." Thus, from the very start of his remarks about Spinoza, Hume makes it clear that his intent here is not to describe or evaluate Spinoza and his doctrines, but is, rather, to use the name of a "famous atheist" to shield himself from accusations of atheism. And, this is a strategy he takes further in T1.4.5.22 and following, where he argues that the real

Spinozist atheists are Hume's contemporary opponents, the "Theologians" who argue for the immateriality of the soul.

As the point of his remarks in this section is not to discuss Spinoza, but only to tar his contemporary adversaries with Spinoza's unsavory reputation, it seems almost fitting that he should be content to cite, not Spinoza himself, but an essay in Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (2013/1697): a secondary source, and one that better represents Spinoza's reputation than his actual doctrine. This strategy fits Hume's purpose, but it must be noted that the use of Bayle's account does make it difficult to assess how much Hume knew of Spinoza's actual doctrine of substance and to what extent Hume's own, implicit, metaphysics was influenced by Spinoza's text, as opposed to what might be called Spinoza-like ideas.

## SECTION II— THE TEXTS

Any evaluation of Hume's summary of Spinoza's substance doctrine must begin with a consideration of Spinoza's own text, against which the inaccuracies of the synopsis and the arguments in *T1.4.5.17-28* can be clarified. Only then can we estimate the degree to which Hume's treatment of Spinoza's doctrine is distorted by the demands of his immediate argument in these paragraphs. We can also see how much more he might have really known of, or been influenced by, what Spinoza actually accomplished in his reworking of the traditional Aristotelian/Scholastic teaching, and critique of Descartes's use of the term.

Spinoza's Text

Spinoza's principle discussion of substance is presented early in Part I of his *Ethics* (1985/1677).<sup>3</sup> He begins in *E1d3* where he says: "By substance, I understand what is in itself, and is conceived through itself; i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing from which it must be formed." This definition is then developed in an extended series of linked propositions and proofs. These include the statements that: "Substance is prior in nature to its affections [modes]" (*E1p1*); "Every substance is necessarily infinite" (*E1p8*); "God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists" (*E1p11*); and "Except God, no substance can be or be conceived" (*E1p14*).

One of the most striking things about this series of statements is the way Spinoza begins to use the terms *substance* and *God*, as synonyms in *E1p11*. The usage may seem arbitrary to the modern reader but, in Scholastic philosophy, it has a technical justification that Spinoza's contemporaries would recognize. The phrase "is in itself" in the *E1d3* definition is a way of saying that substance is the "cause of itself" (*E1d1*), which was one of the ways the scholastics defined God (e.g., Aquinas, 1270; *Summa*, I, q.2, a.3<sup>4</sup>). This identification of the terms *substance* and *God* serves a number of rhetorical purposes, not the least of which was to make Spinoza's philosophy seem less radical than it is and to allow him to avoid explicit atheism.

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<sup>3</sup> The ethics is written in the form of a geometry text in five Parts, each divided into sets of definitions, axioms, propositions and sundry commentaries. Citations to the *Ethics* list the Part number, followed by a letter designating what type of subpart is cited, followed by its number. Thus, *2p1* refers to the first proposition in Part II.

<sup>4</sup> It is likely that Spinoza would have been aware of this through a study of Maimonides and other Jewish scholastics, but his largely Gentile readership would have been more familiar with the Christian tradition represented by Aquinas.



It also paved the way for the more important rhetorical shift that begins in the preface to Part IV where Spinoza reveals the fundamentally naturalistic thrust of his philosophy when he begins to use the phrase “God or Nature”. The net result of these rhetorical moves is to set up a three-part synonymy -- *Substance, God, Nature* – in which the naturalism that is Spinoza’s main innovation, appears to develop out of the scholastic philosophy he is rejecting, while cloaking itself in the language of conventional religious piety. The subtlety and indirection of this approach reflects a caution born of Spinoza’s heritage as the descendent of persecuted Portuguese Jews and makes the exegesis of his text more difficult for subsequent generations, including Hume’s, who were to be less familiar with scholastic terminology. But even if Hume were to miss the nuances, he could not have mistaken Spinoza’s naturalism, which was a hallmark of his own work as well.

Spinoza's use of the term as a synonym for nature is one of two keys to the understanding of his notion of substance. The second is his complex understanding of the relationship between particular natural things and Nature taken as a whole. His understanding of whole/part relationships, like his pervasive general naturalism, is a theme that gets restated in different ways throughout the *Ethics*, and both the highly scholastic formulation of the relationship between substance and its modes (*E1p1*) and Spinoza’s assertions that substance is unique and simple (*E1p8,14*), need to be seen as elements of that larger program.

The assertion of the simplicity of substance/nature actually begins with, or is at least foreshadowed in, the definition at *E1d3*, where he says of substance

both that it “is in itself” and that it “is conceived in itself”. This, as it turns out, is the first element of a critique of the Cartesian notion that mind and body are separate substances (Descartes, 1996/1644). For Spinoza, mind and body, both in individuals and as natural phenomena in a general sense, are not substantially different things but rather two attributes of the single substance, which is nature as a whole. Similarly, his assertion that: “Substance is prior in nature to its affections [modes]” (*E1p1*) is a technical, scholastic formulation of the idea that particular things cannot either *be*, or *be understood*, except in the context of nature as a whole. This is a principle that will find its most concrete expression in one of the appendices to Part IV, where he says: “We know ourselves to be part of the totality of nature and subject to its laws” (*E4apdx32*).

### Hume’s Text

Hume’s discussion of Spinoza is somewhat obscure in its own right. His particular rhetorical purpose was not served by a focus on their common naturalism, and the aspects of Spinoza’s doctrine that feature in his (Hume’s) synopsis are the more technical ones contained in the propositions.

The point that Hume most wants to make, beginning in *T1.4.5.18* is that: “The fundamental principle of the atheism of Spinoza is the doctrine of the simplicity of the universe, and the unity of that substance, in which he supposes both thought and matter to inhere.” Though this summary ignores Spinoza’s attempt to rebut the charge of atheism by claiming that his substance is the equivalent of God, it is otherwise accurate. Spinoza does argue that it is impossible for there to be more than one substance (*E1p14,15*) and, as foreshadowed in his two part

definition of substance (*E1d3*) he does hold that thought and extension are not, as in Descartes, separate things, but equal attributes of a single substance (*E2p1,2*). And, since by identifying God with substance or nature, apart from which nothing can exist, Spinoza does reject the traditional notion of God as a transcendent creator, lawgiver and judge, his doctrine is atheistic from a conventional Judeo-Christian perspective.

Hume's emphasis on the doctrine's atheism, however, is as much a rhetorical device as Spinoza's pretensions to theism. He is not interested in Spinoza's refusal to define God as transcendent. What he really wants to accomplish in this paragraph is the identification of atheism with "the doctrine of the simplicity of the universe." This is a reference to Spinoza's notion that existence is the essence of nature, taken as a whole: and that in-so-far-as they exist, individual "particular things" are not independent entities but Modes of Substance (*E1d5*).

For Hume, whose empiricist caution had led him to an atomistic model of human understanding in which discrete mental perceptions – sense impressions and ideas – are combined in the mind according to the mind's own principles of association (*T1.1.1.1* & *1.1.4.1*, ff.), this kind of broad metaphysical assertion of the fundamental unity of all things, was hardly congenial. Though he fails to note the complexity of Spinoza's account of the relationship between Substance and Modes it is probable that Hume would have rejected it even after considering it on its own merits. But the nature of that relationship is not what concerns him; his real interest in this section is not in analyzing Spinoza's doctrine, but in associating the "simplicity" of Spinoza's substance with theological claims about

the soul, defined as simple immaterial substance, without parts or structure (T1.4.5.18&19).

With this in mind, Hume presents a series of conventional arguments by which other writers have depicted Spinoza's account as fundamentally incoherent, and suggests that the doctrine of an immaterial mental substance cannot avoid being subject to the same critique (T1.4.5.23-26). To this, in paragraph 27, he adds an argument of his own, which is essentially a development of analysis presented in earlier sections of his work (T1.1.6; T1.4.3), where he had deployed a devastating critique of the Aristotelian and Scholastic distinction between substance and accidents. But, in so doing, he shows that he has not taken account of the significant differences between the Aristotelian and Spinozan notions of substance.

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### SECTION III – SUBSTANCE IN TRADITIONAL PHILOSOPHIES

Modes, for Spinoza are distinguished from substance in that, while substance exists and is intelligible without reference to anything else (*E1d3*), Modes exist, and can be understood only in relation to each other and to the Substance from which they derive their existence. This, in spite of the similarities in terminology, is different from the Aristotelian conception in which substance refers to the essential and unchanging qualities of a thing, while mode or accident denotes qualities dependent on the circumstances in which the thing in question is found or observed.

The Aristotelian distinction was based on a quasi-grammatical, subject-modifier model. In the case of a large red ball, for example, the size and color of the ball would be seen as accidental qualities, modifying the ball's substance, presumably its spherical shape. The idea being that it is the ball's shape that is essential to its being a ball, and not a bat – which might also be large and red, but could not be spherical. Thus, in Aristotelian or Scholastic philosophy, the idea of substance served as a way to specify the essential differences between things, the qualities that make a thing what it is, and that it cannot exist without. However, the very notion of substance, in this sense, requires not only that there be something without which a particular entity cannot be what it is, but also that those qualities be different for different entities.

There are obvious problems with this system, not the least of which is that some balls – e.g., those used in rugby and American football – aren't spherical. But the idea of substance persisted. Descartes, though intending to replace the scholastic system with something that could withstand the most extreme skepticism, retained this subject-modifier model in his assertion that mind and body are separate substances (1996/1644, p. 7). Locke, in an effort to repudiate Descartes, replaced the substance–accident distinction with one between primary and secondary qualities (1959, §§ 2.8.9 & 10). This scheme has the advantage of recognizing that the so-called secondary qualities – color, sound, smell and the like – are dependent on the observer and conditions of observation – e.g., lighting, distance from the object, and sensory acuity of the observer. But Locke was an atomist whose ontology allowed only discrete (particular) objects. For

him, the primary qualities, notably shape, define the particular object in much the same way as the scholastic notion of substance does.

Hume, however, pushed Locke's critique of Descartes and the Scholastics to its logical conclusion by noting in *T1.4.4.9*, that we only distinguish shapes by observing differences of color, texture and the other so called secondary qualities. Hume's critique, in *T1.4.5*, of the theologians' doctrine that minds (or souls) are immaterial substances is, thus, a continuation of his argument against the more basic notions of substance and primary qualities, which he had begun in *T1.1.6* and developed further in the earlier sections of *T1.4.4*. But, while in the earlier arguments he had been debating with philosophers, this argument about immaterial mental substance borders on the theological and brings him up against his opponents who could claim the authority of the established Church, which, in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, was a dangerous governmental agency. Here, he felt he had to be very careful and it is for this reason, and for this reason only, that he introduces Spinoza and attempts to dismiss the theologians' arguments by equating them with Spinoza's "atheistic" ones (and, in so doing, shifting the charge of atheism off himself).

His strategy only works, however, because his summary of Spinoza's idea of substance is so brief as to miss the essential difference between it and conventional uses of the term. In Aristotle and Descartes, the whole point of talking about substances is to specify the differing essences of different entities; and Locke, too (under the guise of primary qualities) sought to identify essential differences, beyond those of appearance, between discrete things. Spinoza, in contrast, allows of only one substance and, while not denying existence of

particular things, argues that they are not entirely discrete, but exist only as Modes, or instantiations of this unique Substance (E1d5).

A generation later than Spinoza, Locke was to present his philosophy as a critique of both Aristotle and Descartes. But Locke was only to discard their terminology while keeping subject-modifier structure and the notion of essential differences between particular things. Spinoza, while keeping the terminology had discarded both the grammatical model and the notion that there is anything essential to an object, other than the simple fact of that object's existence. Hume, because he was extending Locke's critique, is perceived as being part of an independent British tradition, but the core of his contribution was far more radical than Locke's and far more consistent with Spinoza's explicitly metaphysical position.

#### CONCLUSION

Despite his aversion to, and rejection of, metaphysical language, Hume's critique of the conventional notion of substance was developed in a social and intellectual climate that had been influenced by Spinoza's explicitly metaphysical, but equally radical rejection of the traditional concept. It is not entirely clear that Hume understood the metaphysical implications of his position. His citation of Bayle as the source for his discussion of Spinoza's metaphysics suggests that he might have been considerably less familiar with the text of Spinoza's *Ethics* than some of his other work, particularly the *Theological-Political Treatise* (2002/1670). On the other hand his reference to Bayle's *Dictionnaire*, could have been intended, like his references to Spinoza's reputation for atheism and his use

of arguments based on what others had said of Spinoza, as part of a deliberate attempt to avoid acknowledging any direct familiarity with such a dangerous thinker.

But, regardless of Hume's conscious intentions, analysis of Spinoza's text shows that the substance ontology had already been under explicitly metaphysical attack for two generations when he came to compose his *Treatise*. His apparent rejection of metaphysics, therefore, was either the rhetorical device of an author seeking a wider audience, or a misunderstanding of the metaphysical underpinnings of his own position. In either case, the logical positivists' reliance on him as a model for their own attempts to reject or ignore metaphysics was ill conceived, and not something psychologists should emulate.

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